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PROGRAM Behind the Lines

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HARRISON SALISBURY: I'm Harrison Salisbury. Welcome to Behind the Lines. I'm here in Bethesda, Maryland today at the home of William E. Colby, the former Director of the CIA. Mr. Colby and I will be talking about the role of the CIA and the press and the conflict between the two of them in America today.

SALISBURY: Bill, I want to talk to you today about the press and the CIA. Now, there's a lot of discussion these days about different questions of the CIA and the news profession. Some of the related to individuals being used or cooperating with the CIA. And other questions that haven't been discussed as much but which interest me a lot are the possibility of impure information, that is to say, propaganda or cover stories or any kind of a deception operation feeding into the general news stream and being accepted as real news. And you've commented on that a couple of times, as to indicating, in your belief, at any rate, that this is minimized at the present time.

WILLIAM COLBY: I believe so, yes, yes. And, traditionally, I think there has been an effort by CIA to insure an absolute minimum of deception of the American press. Now, that -- in other words, even the people that we used at various times in the past who were Americans, the tradition was that you left them alone to report whatever they wanted to to their own American press masters, and you didn't tell them how to write an article or what article to write.

SALISBURY: Well, that -- I know that was your general position.

Now, in some other research that I've been doing lately on The New York Times, I came onto a very interesting document

recently. It was an internal memo that was circulated in The Times about 1954 among the senior editors, and the reason for this memo -- the essence of this memo was to be on guard against false stories which were put into circulation, as they said, in the rather naive words of those days, by the American Secret Service. What they were talking about was the CIA, but it interested me that they used that phrase. And there had been several examples in which our foreign correspondents had been misled by fabrications, propaganda efforts by the CIA; and the paper was trying to make an effort to try and distinguish between these things, a very difficult thing to do, naturally.

What interests me is not whether they succeeded in that, but the fact that by 1954, when the cold war was still running along pretty hot, although Stalin was dead, that this had become a serious enough problem so that one very responsible American newspaper was attempting to make some effort to sort out fact from fiction.

Now, I assume that in your view, at any rate, that it's not a serious problem of that nature today.

COLBY: No, it's certainly not. The problem is that we really have arrived at one world. And I think the thought that we had in the past was clearly that we could separate out a propaganda effort or a covert propaganda effort aimed abroad from any impact in America, and that those two were two different things. Now, there might be a little spillover. In other words, if you are supporting a particular political group in some country and you're putting out positive information about it -- it's usually true information, but it's obviously selected, because the false information really isn't very good anyway, as you well know -- the true information about it. It does give a slightly warped impression of the importance of that group, probably, and deliberately so, because you're trying to build it up and help it.

Well, the American who reads it in some other language might then feel that the group is more important than it actually at that time was, as an attempt to build it up and make it really the most important group in the country.

So, the problem is that the American press is everywhere; the American news services, the American media, the news magazines, the television and so forth, is almost the mainstream of all international news, as well as national news. There are other news services, of course, of other countries.

SALISBURY: But it must be that this will seep into the -- it's like a circulatory system of the blood in the body. If it gets in there somehow, it can be combed out here and there, but it may be there.

COLBY: But I think I should say that I think the common practice is not to put out a false story. I think the...

SALISBURY: ...put out a true story with a little false information in it.

COLBY: With -- no, a selection of true stories; in other words, a selection of the truth, but to leave out some other aspects of it, and maybe put a little long conclusion...

SALISBURY: A little salt and pepper in it.

COLBY: Once in a while, but...

SALISBURY: Well, now, then, I think we come up to the question which bothers me a good deal about this general practice, and that is, while I can see perfectly well a very legitimate use for these techniques in a war situation, and I can certainly see its use in an extreme cold war situation, we now are moving out of that period into a time when, as I would see it, the psychology of the agency and its operations has not changed all that much, and this may be one of the sources that we have in conflict, particularly with the newspaper profession. Because we certainly violently reject the idea of installation in our bloodstream of false rumors and things of that kind for purposes...

COLBY: Well, I think the issue I would take with your statement is whether the psychology of the agency has changed. I think that it has, to a certain extent. For example, during those cold war times, 30, 40, 50 percent of our budget, of CIA's budget in any one year would be spent on propaganda, political operations, even paramilitary operations. Today that figure is in the realm of 5%.

And secondly, at that time, I think, we were heavily engaged in strong efforts to have a major impact; whereas today I think we are merely trying to support things that are really there and trying to influence key individuals who are in particular situations; but much less of the mass effort.

SALISBURY: What about the mechanism for putting rumors into action? What about the ownership of newspapers by the CIA?

COLBY: Well, in the United States, no.

SALISBURY: No, I know in the United States...

COLBY: Of course, in foreign countries, from time to time, there has been a considerable assistance given to struggling press that were being suppressed. There's one very prominent one discussed in South America in some of the recent...

SALISBURY: I was thinking of some in some other less exotic countries.

COLBY: Quite obviously, in a country in which public opinion is a very important factor in what's going on in a contest between two political groups, then obviously it's important to the political group being supported by the United States that it have a vehicle to put its views before the public, and that includes newspapers, magazines, all the rest of it.

SALISBURY: This presupposes, does it not, that the CIA goes on with its operational side? All of this has nothing really to do with intelligence, as we understand it; intelligence being seeking out information about countries...

COLBY: Well, it has something to do with it, but it is a separate thing.

SALISBURY: It's a separate thing.

COLBY: It has to do with it because you frequently are in contact with the same people, and you're dealing with the same people who can give you information, who are interested in having an impact...

SALISBURY: But this is a more influencing affairs in that particular country, so that...

COLBY: And I think the basic lesson that has been learned, and learned very well, is that you don't do it with mirrors. The way you really do it, you don't control it from CIA. CIA assists somebody who wants to do it for his own reasons, but doesn't have enough means and ability and so forth to do it alone. Just as on the other side, in the Communist Parties, for instance, in some of these contests, they are receiving outside assistance to strengthen their ability to do what they want to do.

SALISBURY: Well, I might make a little argument about the sort of us being the mirror image of what the Communists do, but that's another different question. We'll leave that one aside.

Now, let's go on to the question which I think bothers newspapermen in this country most, which is the idea of the CIA actually using American newspapermen, either in a formal sense or an informal sense; or, the other question, of the CIA using newspaper cover for intelligence purposes.

COLBY: Well, of course, I think this is pretty well wrapped up at this time. A couple of years ago, this question was raised by a few people, when I was new in my then-job as Director. And I looked at it and I agreed that, really, CIA shouldn't be using the staff members of general circulation U.S.

journals, either with or without the permission of their bosses. And so we terminated about five that we had at the time; that's about all. We terminated those.

But I said the free-lancer, the stringer, the fellow out there who's just submitting his copy -- the editor who receives it knows that that man isn't under his control; he's just reading what he's reading and deciding whether he wants to have him.

SALISBURY: Maybe I'd better define what a stringer is, you know, because I think many of our readers don't know. A stringer is a man who doesn't work, say, for The New York Times; he works for a local newspaper in Bangkok, for example. And when there isn't a correspondent of the The Times present, he may file stories to the newspaper or the agency, and he's paid a specific sum, either by the month or by the story.

COLBY: Piecework.

SALISBURY: So he's not a staffer.

COLBY: Yes. And my point was that the editor receiving copy from an individual like this knows that it's not his man, and that he's receiving something from the outside.

Now, CIA has a very difficult time with the business of cover. There are whole areas that CIA's been barred from. The Peace Corps, of course, for many years, USIA; there's been a program to get us out of AID cover, the Agency for International Development; there are many more. The Fulbright scholars; we had the whole thing about the foundations in 1967. There are programs now to get us out of the -- any relationships at all with clergy, missionaries, or anything else. And my feeling was that we really have to fight kind of a rearguard action, or we wouldn't have anything we could do at all. There are people who say we shouldn't use business cover. There are people who say we shouldn't use diplomatic cover. There are people who say we shouldn't use military cover. Well, you eliminate all that, and you really don't have much left to appear under.

Therefore, I took that as what I thought was a reasonable distinction.

Well, since that time, of course, the pressure in the last few months has grown on this subject, and Mr. Bush, I think very wisely, has issued a directive that CIA will not use anybody who's accredited by an American newspaper.

SALISBURY: I gather that there's no bar on using foreigners or foreign news agencies or foreign newspapers or...

COLBY: Well, I'd hate to have a bar against using somebody

from TASS.

SALISBURY: That would be dandy, but I think it probably would be difficult as well.

COLBY: Well...

SALISBURY: I think...

COLBY: ...totally out of the question.

SALISBURY: Well, I would think it probably is, too.

COLBY: I say don't put it totally out of the question.

SALISBURY: Oh, don't put it -- excuse me. I'll put it in the question, then.

But I think I would speak for the American press quite appropriately if I said that this remains a very touchy and uncomfortable issue. I think it's been put aside, Bill, as you say. I think that the press itself feels that its purity, its honor, and all the rest of it has been challenged.

Let me just tell you how I feel about it. For years I worked abroad and I had to work beside the TASS man or the Pravda man or the Izvestia man, or whatever the Russian was, and I knew that he was an agent for the KGB, automatically, all the Russian correspondents. This was my assumption. I felt a superiority and always pushed that as hard as I could with the Russians, that American newspapermen were not agents of their government in any way, aboveboard or anything else. And I felt it gave us a special place in the world. I still think it does. And I think it's been polluted by this, and I don't think the issuance of a statement by George Bush brings it to an end. I don't think we come to an end until we know how bad it was.

COLBY: Oh, no. I think -- I think it does end it. I agreed with your philosophy with respect to staff members. George Bush agrees with your philosophy with respect to anybody, part-time or fulltime, who's accredited by an American news journal.

But to say that no other member of a foreign press could be touched by CIA, when their own governments, and I mean very democratic governments...

SALISBURY: Excuse me. You misunderstood my position. I was not saying that the CIA might not use other newspapermen. In the field of espionage, I know perfectly well that these people are fair game. No, I'm talking about...

COLBY: Because foreign governments, of course, use it,

and I mean democratic governments.

SALISBURY: I'm talking about going back to our own staff people.

COLBY: But as for revealing names...

SALISBURY: Yes. That's what I'm talking about.

COLBY: I really don't believe in ex post facto changing the rules. When the rules were a certain way and were understood and accepted in that way and people made confidential agreements with CIA under those circumstances, and it was generally accepted...

SALISBURY: I doubt that it was generally accepted. It may have been by the CIA, but I don't think in my profession that it was. I really don't.

COLBY: Well, I'd agree with you on the staff members, perhaps. But certainly when I explained the difference between staff members of general circulation journals and the stringer, the issue died for about two years and it went away. There wasn't any particular objection to my solution at that time. Since that time, additional pressure has grown.

SALISBURY: I think you'd agree with me [that] if you took a poll of Washington correspondents, that they would feel more as I do than as you do on this particular question.

COLBY: Possibly. But the public discussion died out for about two years after I had defined the line.

SALISBURY: It's come forward very strongly.

COLBY: Now it's come forward again, and Mr. Bush has responded to it, I think quite properly, as I probably I would have if the pressure continued.

I think the recognition of the independence of the press, under the American Constitution -- we in CIA are very conscious of that. But we also believe that the role of the press in foreign countries is not worked by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, and that if we are to defend our country properly, we are going to have to go where the news is.

SALISBURY: I'm not trying to make -- put a blanket over foreign -- foreign countries can take care of their own journalists.

COLBY: Well, then I'd like to be able to take care of a few of 'em too.

SALISBURY: All right. Okay.

But this leads me back once again to the question we started out about, which is the pollution of the purity of the news. And God knows it's a difficult job, without the CIA or any other intelligence agencies, to keep it straight. But I have in mind a story about -- which I encountered myself once when I was in Honolulu some years back, 1960 to precise, when the intelligence officer for CINCPAC, which, I suppose, was our most important command at that time, came to me with a problem which he said he had. His problem was that his commander-in-chief insisted that when he put down his intelligence evaluation of the situation, that he put beside that evaluation a copy, the latest copy of The New York Times. Now, the reason for the admiral's order was simply that he wanted some base line to check the intelligence against, and I think it was a very wise precaution.

And the problem that this officer had was that in those days he was getting the airmail copy of The Times from Paris, and he wanted to find out if he couldn't get it from New York in order to get it in there a little bit faster so he could get his intelligence forward.

Now, it seems to me that if you get to the point where a very important member of the defense establishment wants, as I say, very properly, to be able to compare the in-house information with the general -- the best he can get outside, the reason he does it is he feels that the outside is probably a purer product, though maybe not so complete.

COLBY: Well, I think the explanation for the fact of looking at both of those reports -- and I do, too. I read the papers, even when I was in CIA, every day, for two reasons.

First, the CIA information does depend, to some extent, upon the press. Obviously, we subscribe to the press services, we subscribe to the journals, and we benefit from everything that we can get overtly. It would be foolish to try to spy to discover something which is published. So we do have a very extensive effort of reading what is published. And as you know, some reporters are very effective in foreign countries, and you were, and get information that's very valuable to us.

Secondly, however, we also do appreciate the independent judgment of the American press. Now, much of that independent judgment is actually based on information which came from CIA.

For example, you know today, I'm sure, how many Soviet missiles there are. That was learned by some very complex and sensitive information, but it was then opened up and given to the American press.

SALISBURY: What I was going to say about that, Bill, was that I, like any Washington correspondent, have noticed that

certain types of information suddenly become more available through the CIA and other government agencies when there is something else looming on the horizon. I always notice that the Navy, for example, was able to release confidential information about Soviet submarines operating along the coast, usually about the time the naval appropriations bill was coming up, when...

COLBY: Well, the only problem with that, quite frankly -- I've heard that story too, and, of course, it's an obvious...

SALISBURY: It can be easily demonstrated.

COLBY: But the fact is that in the Washington budget cycle, every month is budget time, because once the budget is discussed -- we're discussing the budget for this year before the Appropriations Committee, and then two months later it's coming up to the floor in the House, and then a month later it's coming up to the floor in the Senate, and then we're starting on next year's budget discussions with the committees; and the whole cycle just goes all year round. So that if that particular report about the submarines coming closer to the coast was just given out shortly after the submarines came close to the coast, it was the Soviets who chose the budget time...

SALISBURY: Maybe so. My own sort of ignorant assumption is that they're probably out there all the time.

COLBY: Well, I think that particular story was that they came closer.

SALISBURY: The CIA has suffered an enormous public image...

COLBY: Problem.

SALISBURY: ...defeat, or I don't know what you want to call it, but it...

COLBY: ...problem.

SALISBURY: And you've devoted yourself enormously in the last couple of years trying to give the public a new image of the CIA.

Now, is this a cosmetic thing, or does it really get to the roots of some of the genuine problems? Because I think there are very genuine problems that have produced this situation...

COLBY: I think there is a genuine problem that produced it, and that is the combination of a tradition of total secrecy in CIA, to the absurd extent that Bobby Kennedy told us to take the name -- the sign off the road pointing into CIA. Everything was supposed to be secret. And that's just impossible and absurd

in American society.

But, plus, a misapprehension coming from the old spy novels of what the old espionage and intelligence business was all about.

So, it reminds me, of course, as I've said, of the six blind men around the elephant, and one feels the trunk and says it's a tree, and one feels the tusk and says it's a spear, and one feels the side of the elephant and says it's a wall. None of them had a clear picture of the whole elephant. So that when one tusk poked through, of the intelligence elephant, the people thought that that's what it really was, that this was the tip of the iceberg and the rest of it was exactly like that.

Well, it's not so. Intelligence has changed so remarkably in the last 10-15 years, thanks to technology, thanks to the academic disciplines that have been brought into it, of study, thanks to the acces to the information explosion that's gone on around the world. It has changed enormously.

Yes, there still is espionage, but it is -- and it's still important in some areas...

SALISBURY: But doesn't the problem really derive not from espionage, not from intelligence operations -- although I know the House committee tags you on two or three, and you're bound to be tagged on some of those. But don't 95% of the complaints come out of operations?

COLBY: Sure, out of the political and paramilitary operations. And my point there was that, really, some years ago, yes, we spent, 30, 40, 50 percent of our effort on that. Today it's 5%.

Now, the question of whether this was a good thing or not is a legitimate question.

SALISBURY: Wasn't that argued from the very beginning, when the CIA was founded. Weren't there two -- well, there was debate among a lot of people.

COLBY: Some debate, yes. Some debate, but...

[Confusion of voices]

COLBY: ...in 1948 the government did set up a special office, which initially wasn't even in CIA, to carry on that kind of political warfare that had to be conducted.

SALISBURY: That's right.

Now, I think an example of whether this kind of operation is useful is Angola, in a way, where a black nationalist group was trying to assert itself against a countering black nationalist group, which was supported by the Portugese, which was supported by the Russians, and which was supported by, and actually even replaced in the combat, by 10 or 12 thousand Cubans.

Now, the question of whether we should give some help to that black nationalist group to sustain itself and to participate in that area, so that this international interference wouldn't be impressive, but that the local groups could come to some arrangement...

SALISBURY: Bill, I don't want to really go into that argument in too great depth, because it's a little bit...

COLBY: But I think the point is that we are talking about covert activity, paramilitary and political, which can be of relatively minor size, not involve the prestige of the United States, and can actually do a considerable benefit.

SALISBURY: This, I think, is a...

COLBY: ...all of them don't work.

SALISBURY: This, I think, is an argument which should be debated in Congress and public...

COLBY: ...Congress has voted in support of it on two occasions, by two and three to one majorities.

SALISBURY: But on the other hand, I think it's fair to say that the public still is a little bit confused as to how all these component parts come together. And if we return to the specific newspaper...

COLBY: But I think the job is to try to explain intelligence as much as we possibly can, make it open, put it under the Constitution, under the laws, so that it operates as a regular part of the government and not over in the shadows.

SALISBURY: I would agree with that, but I wonder whether or not, so far as the press is concerned and so far -- looking beyond the CIA, looking beyond, even, the press, looking at the image of our country as a democracy, which I believe in and I know you believe in devoutly, whether or not we have not found ourselves, not because it was easy, but because it was a hard fight that we're in, to engage -- we've engaged in too much mirror-imaging. Because we've been faced so many times with a desperate opponent which has no rules [unintelligible], no morals at all, we have felt it necessary to fight him in that same way.

Now, in war we say yes. Morals go out the window. Defeating the enemy...

COLBY: Not entirely, not entirely.

SALISBURY: Not entirely, but to a great extent.

Now, in this situation, doesn't it seem to you that we have lost a great deal of our moral prestige in the world?

COLBY: I don't think we've lost our moral prestige in the world.

SALISBURY: ...a great deal...

COLBY: I think there are a lot of self-doubts among Americans that a lot of foreigners are worried about, as to whether the Americans really have the will to exercise world power and to play the role that we Americans either have to play ourselves or abdicate to somebody else.

SALISBURY: There's a question, I think, which is a moral question, and that is -- what I have found, to my amazement, in talking with Russians, not with Chinese, 'cause I don't think they understand this at all, but also with Western Europeans, in all these painful exposes, of which the CIA is the latest one and the one the press comes into that, of absolute amazement that we really believe in the fundamental moralities we've longed preached to the world. And I think this is perhaps the most precious thing in the world.

COLBY: It is very precious, and I think -- I think -- I agree that we benefit by our self-examination, but at the same time we create some doubts. Now, my job is to try to put the self-examination into accurate proportions, to try to make very clear what the reality of CIA's operations are, as distinct from these blindman elephant impressions which are not accurate.

SALISBURY: I think you've done a magnificent job of it, Bill.

COLBY: Well, thank you.

SALISBURY: And I've watched you doing it for the last two years, and I think it's great. And I think the only place where we would disagree, in this area anyway, is that I feel that it would help CIA, it would help the country, and I'm sure it would help the newspaper profession, if you could go one step further. I know you can't be perfect; we aren't perfect; the country isn't perfect. But I think that there is another step that ought to be taken.

COLBY: Well...

SALISBURY: I want to thank you very much for being with me on Behind the LInes.

I'm Harrison Salisbury, and we've been talking with Bill Colby, the former head of the CIA.